



Extra Feature Story

School Lunch Gets a Makeover in Hunger-Free Kids Act

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President Obama has signed a landmark child nutrition bill that improves the quality of school lunches by giving schools more money to serve healthier food. The legislation, called the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, also helps provide breakfast and dinner at school.

The new law, a critical part of [first lady Michelle Obama's initiative](#) against child obesity and hunger, will cost the government \$4.5 billion and will boost schools' meal budgets by approximately 6 cents per meal.

Many politicians who believe in smaller government criticized the legislation because they feel it is expensive and gives the government too big of a role in deciding what kids can eat.

Former Alaska governor and vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin recently brought 200 homemade cookies to a Pennsylvania high school to protest extending the government's control over what schools and parents may serve to kids. However, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack said such criticism misses the point.

"We're not trying to prevent parents from bringing cupcakes or treats during the day for special occasions," Vilsack told the San Francisco Chronicle. "That's clearly not what we're talking about."

Fundraisers, vending machines and cafeterias will see changes

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act will regulate for the first time what items may be sold in schools outside of the lunch line. For example, the new nutrition standards will be applied to food sold for school fundraisers, in vending machines and in a la carte lines.

The bill does not list specific nutrition standards that schools must use, but tasks the Department of Agriculture to come up with new standards and a plan to implement them in schools.

Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, says the standards will require more whole grains, fruits, vegetables and low-fat options, all of which she says are positive changes for schoolchildren. Schools will likely be prevented from selling food like ice cream, high-calorie snacks and french fries.

"This child nutrition bill gets a lot of junk food out of schools and a lot of healthier food into schools," Wootan said. "It is a historic step toward reducing childhood obesity and helping parents feed their children better."

Obesity vs. hunger

One of the challenges facing lawmakers is how to address two seemingly opposite problems: child obesity and child hunger. Today, nearly one out of three American kids are obese-- dangerously overweight -- while about 16 million children live in homes [where food is scarce](#).

To fight both hunger and obesity at the same time, the new law focuses on helping schools serve more nutritious meals and adds 20 million after-school meals each year to ensure students receive dinners as well as lunches.

Although they may seem unrelated, childhood obesity and hunger have been linked to the same fundamental problems: a lack of wholesome, nutritious food. Healthy foods like fruits and vegetables often cost the most at grocery stores, making them difficult to afford for many Americans.

Some experts trace this pricing imbalance to outdated farm subsidies, which were designed decades ago to give American farmers money to grow high-calorie foods like corn and soybeans. As a result of those government payments to farmers, foods containing unhealthy ingredients like high-fructose corn syrup cost much less than fruits and vegetables.

Law's impact is far-reaching

Supporters of the new law say it has benefits beyond improving school lunches. In her remarks at the bill's signing, first lady Michelle Obama cited a study indicating that America's youth [are less prepared to fight](#) in the military because of obesity and said the new nutrition standards will help improve national defense.

The law also seeks to stem rising health care costs, since healthy children generally require fewer visits to the doctor and less medical attention.

- Compiled by Veronica DeVore for NewsHour Extra